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Andrei Rublev: Religious Epiphany in Art

Abstract

Andrei Rublev (1966) was Andrei Tarkovsky's second feature film. It was banned for five years in his own country but won the International Critics Prize at Cannes in 1969. Other films by the director include *Solaris* (1972), *Mirror* (1975), *Stalker* (1979), *Nostalgia* (1982) and *Sacrifice* (1986).

The Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky (1932-1986) was especially interested in the relationship between art and religious experience. This concern is exemplified in his 1966 feature *Andrei Rublev*, still considered by many today as one of the greatest achievements in the history of film. It was Tarkovsky's belief that art should have a metaphysical function, urging the observer to strive with "the crucial questions of his existence", and, at its most sublime, to be expressive of the Transcendent and induce in the beholder what can be called a Religious Epiphany. Here this term denotes the core religious experience common to all spiritual efforts: an apprehension of the absolute, the infinite, of Truth or God. In discussing the aesthetic and thematic ambitions of *Andrei Rublev* I wish to elucidate the possibility of religious epiphany and, with it, Tarkovsky's own fundamentally Christian assessment of the role of art and artist.

Theme and Aesthetic

Andrei Rublev follows the life of the title figure, a 15th century monk and icon painter, through a period of Tartar invasions, religious cruelty, and internal dissension between three parties: the Russian State, the Orthodox Church and the common people. The film is broken up into eight episodes dating from 1400 to 1423 with a prologue and epilogue. Although there was little biographical record of Rublev's life, Tarkovsky and his screenwriter did not wish to invent one. Their Rublev is, for the most part, a passive and reflective observer of his times, seeking, in his art, a response and solution to the discords in Russia. Rublev's most famous icon, the Old Testament Trinity, shown in the film's epilogue, is that solution. Tarkovsky writes in his book *Sculpting in Time* that the Old Testament Trinity epitomises "the ideal of brotherhood, love and quiet sanctity" and that this "was the artistic and philosophical basis of the screenplay."¹ The idea of a harmonised trinity thus becomes a plea in the film for accord between Church, State and People. It also epitomizes the director's view of art as a reconciler of disparities.

Tarkovsky, like Robert Bresson in France, sought to infuse cinema with religious experience not merely through choice of content but also through style and rigorous formal techniques. His cinema is markedly different from films such as De Mille's *The Ten Commandments* and Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* which, while containing religious narratives, are not formally expressive of

religious experience. Tarkovsky's methodology has something in common with the theory Paul Schrader expounds in his book *Transcendental Style in Film*:

"Transcendental style, like any form of transcendental art, strives towards the ineffable and invisible" by using "...precise temporal means - i.e. camera angles, dialogue, editing - for predetermined transcendental ends."²

While *Andrei Rublev* relates an individual's experience of religious epiphany, it simultaneously aspires to induce in the viewer a likewise experience, or at least an apprehension of it. I have outlined below some of the techniques and narrative devices Tarkovsky employs to convey the transcendent.

Naturalism and the Numinous

When we regard the look and construction of *Andrei Rublev*, above all we notice how graphically real his re-creation of Medieval Russia is. The wide-screen Cinemascope photography accentuates the vast Russian landscape, its marshes, forests, and torrents of rain. Nature is as much a part of the film as Rublev is, and the choice of black and white film contributes strikingly to the sense of hardship and toil amidst the oppressive grandeur of land and weather. Tarkovsky has said that he finds colour photography distracting and that it "wars against the expressiveness of the image."³ He went through enormous lengths to remain faithful to the texture of reality, and, in fact, many critics found the scenes of raiding and torture objectionable because of their 'naturalism.'

Conversely, we also find in the film elements of a dream-like quality that seem to merge with reality. The balloon-flight, the 'Russian Calvary', the snowfall inside the Cathedral, the appearance of Theophanes' ghost, and the reappearance of the Holy Fool in vestal dress, emerge like images out of a dream. It is predominantly this technique of blending naturalism and the numinous that gives Tarkovsky's images their revelatory power. To quote Schrader again, "Transcendental style seeks to maximize the mystery of existence."⁴ In remaining graphically faithful to reality - to both its beauty and its dirt - Tarkovsky compels us to believe in the action on screen, but whereas realist or documentary cinema takes reality for granted as an end in itself, Tarkovsky's camera meditates on its very nature, seeking to liberate the unknown inherent in the known. Many shots linger upon the faces of peasants as they gaze inwardly - e.g. in the first episode where there is a slow, circular pan of the inhabitants of the hut where the monks take shelter from the rain. Accompanying this pan is the plaintive voice of a woman singing off-screen mixed with the sound of rainfall, and the total effect is transportive -like haiku poetry, we are urged to identify with a mood, an intangible.

Even more expressive of this technique is Rublev's vision set forth in *'The Passion According to Andrei'*. In removing Christ's Passion to a snow-covered Russian landscape, Tarkovsky brings new relevance to this archetypal sacrifice. The humanity of Christ is stressed and, as he goes to the cross, Magdalene grasps

his leg in a sensually charged pathos. Uniquely unusual is an on-looking child who seems to grasp the significance of Christ's sacrifice - she smiles radiantly at him as he passes. Rublev ends the vision by saying, "Perhaps Christ was born and died to make peace between God and man." This statement is also, in a sense, Tarkovsky's view of the role of the artist. Aesthetically, the scene has obvious similarities to the paintings of Brueghel the Elder, who celebrated peasant life and also transposed biblical subjects into settings of his own rural landscape. By bringing the numinous into a local and naturalistic framework. Tarkovsky, like Brueghel, creates an utterly immediate and convincing vision.

Leonardo and the Total Image

Tarkovsky has said, "the great function of the artistic image is to be a kind of detector of infinity"⁵ In his book *Sculpting in Time*, his discussion of Leonardo Da Vinci's *Young Lady with a Juniper* helps to highlight his own view of the cinematic image. He says of the painting:

"There is something inexpressibly beautiful about her and at the same time repulsive, fiendish A true artistic image gives the beholder a simultaneous experience of the most complex, contradictory, sometimes even mutually exclusive feelings.... We cannot comprehend the totality of the universe, but the poetic image is able to express that totality."⁶

In Andrei Rublev both the Holy Fool and the pagan seductress embody this principle. Tarkovsky's women unite beauty and ugliness, holiness and depravity,

and his view of the image as revelation works on this principle of totality. Rublev is both drawn towards and repelled by these two women. In his relationship with the Holy Fool we see his struggle to understand the ambivalence of good and evil, of innocence and depravity. After she runs off with the Tartars, Rublev is fully disillusioned by her baseness, yet she reappears at a moment of epiphanic climax, at the first peal of Boriska's bell, dressed in vestal attire, her aspect radiant and smiling. This strange image, inexplicable yet extraordinarily appropriate, strives towards a revelation of totality and the infinite. A similar effect is achieved during the episode of the midsummer fire festival revealing the mysterious dangers and excitements brought about by the conflicts between the church and the pagan traditions of the peasants. In the scene an alluring pagan woman, fully undressed, tempts Rublev with a kiss. When he calls her kind of love sinful, she replies, "Isn't all love the same?" - an enigmatic, perhaps unanswerable question that places Rublev and the viewer in that penumbrous region both Tarkovsky and Leonardo relish.

Image as Icon

The composition of many of the shots in *Andrei Rublev* has unsurprising similarities to icon painting. The numerous figures and faces lost in thought are quite often centrally and frontally positioned. Centrality, frontality and the 'inward gaze' are a typical element of the icon. In Tarkovsky's aesthetic, this use of

cinematic iconography seeks to deify the humanistic. Religious icons were generally regarded as 'devotional aids' and as Angela Dalle Vacche notes in her book, *Cinema and Painting*, the icon is "an image of pure fixation" and,

According to Russian Orthodox dogma..., divinity exists in human form through the presence of the icon itself..., since the boundary between signifier and signified is so elastic that the beholder can relate to the representation as if it were the represented itself, to the image of God as to God.⁷

Tarkovsky's film, like icon painting, attempts to do away with mere representation. At variance with his sometimes Brueghel-like compositions that scatter men over a vast depth of field, we find many shots that place Man at the centre of nature and the world. Like the icon, he uses a shallow depth of field so that his subjects stand out against the abstracted background of landscape. We are asked not merely to observe, but to venerate and mystically identify with the characters and conflicts on screen. Tarkovsky eschewed and repudiated the use of symbolism in film - his images never referred to something 'outside the frame', for the astute to interpret, but like the icon, were meant to be utterly direct visual means of expressing and apprehending the numinous. Art, for Tarkovsky, is conducive to prayer.

Redeeming, the Flow of Water

The notion of Time is also fundamental to Tarkovsky's film aesthetics. Hollywood cinema has been moving toward a faster and faster pace of editing so that we get a series of shots, fragments of a scene, that we conceptually organize into an understood whole. Many Hollywood films have average shot lengths of four to six seconds. This, however, fractures and diminishes the sense of time flowing through the action. For Tarkovsky, cinema is a means for "taking an impression of time. Time captured in its factual forms and manifestations: such is the supreme idea of cinema as art."⁸ Tarkovsky rejects a montage-orientated, conceptual cinema in favour of an organic, direct perception of the image. Time can be said to be the soul of the image - its reality is the presence of time. In Andrei Rublev, as one critic remarks, "shots lasting from two to more than three minutes occur with some frequency throughout."⁹ The heightened sense of realism the viewer experiences in Andrei Rublev is largely due to the palpability of time flowing through the action. Time is a bridge, a physical relation between the image and the audience. Without this connection we become merely spectators, and cannot, as Tarkovsky would have us, identify with and participate in the experience on screen. Hollywood entertainment as escapism is designed to engage the audience in such a way that they forget the passing of time. For a Hollywood audience time is experienced as

boredom. Tarkovsky wishes to redeem time. He has said he is "interested in the inner, moral qualities essentially inherent in time itself."¹⁰

One of the ways in which he makes time felt is the long take. Another is in his use of water. Besides the rain and rippling puddles in *Andrei Rublev*, there are shots of streams, rivers, the spilling of milk or paint into streams, and characters staring reflectively at rain or river water. Tarkovsky comments, "It is a very cinematic element, and through it, I have tried to express the idea of passing time. Water conveys depth, a sense of transformation and reflection. I cannot imagine a film without water."¹¹ In one scene where the Duke's men attack the artisans, shots of stabbings, mutilations, and eyes being gouged out resolve into a slow shot of white paint staining into a stream of water. We see the water motif- accepting, enveloping, cleansing, and indicative of change. It is by a stream that Andrei envisions his 'Russian Calvary' and it is a river that rescues the pagan woman from her persecutors. When Foma is killed and falls into a stream, smoke wafts along the water - like the breath of life passing over death - and in the film's very last image, four unbridled horses stand basking in rainfall.

Art and Artist

Throughout his book on cinema, *Sculpting in Time*, Tarkovsky vituperates the 'wrong turn' modern art has taken in abandoning metaphysical questions. The

modern ideology of self-expression, art for art's sake, and in film and painting, an academic preoccupation with method, has stifled the spiritual. As Kandinsky says, "The 'what?' disappears; only the 'how?' remains. The method becomes a rationale. Art loses its soul."¹² In some cases, even the method disappears, the artist simply affirms himself as artist. An allusion to this seems to be the case in 'The Last Judgment' episode, where Rublev, in a fit of frustration and impotence, flings paint against the blank wall of the cathedral and smudges it with his fingers. It looks like something out of the Jackson Pollock school of painting, where the artist creates by surrendering to spontaneous outburst. During the scene, the Holy Fool enters, sees the mess on the wall and begins sobbing in despair. Perhaps Tarkovsky's comment is that this kind of art is profane self-indulgence, void of any spiritual link to the audience. He emphasizes both in the film and in his book, that the role of the artist is that of a servant - that he must pay for his talent by serving the community and God, and not by glorifying himself.

The relationship between Rublev and Theophanes the Greek illustrates many of Tarkovsky's own feelings on the role of art and artist. Theophanes was considered the greatest icon painter of the period until Andrei Rublev emerged. He is depicted in the film as something like an Old Testament prophet-type with his long white beard, sharp little eyes, and an ideology of wrath and retribution. He represents the old order and his art is somewhat austere and admonishing. As one

critic observes, both Daniil and Theophanes are "limited by the values of their time - the idea that the function of art is to expose and condemn human weakness."¹³ Theophanes' art leaves the people unmoved or despondent and reminds them only of their woes. Rublev rejects the old order and is the first to revitalise Russian art by humanizing it and infusing it with a new and essentially Christian vision.

Rublev's Russia, Polarities Touching

The evocation of medieval Russia with its peasantry and nobility, pagan festivals, religious cruelties and Tartar invasions is a dazzling mixture of disparities. Rublev's artistic vision is a result of having lived through the crises of his times. He develops a creed of charity, brotherhood and sacrifice, rather than one of righteousness and intolerance that Theophanes and Kirill adhere to. In Rublev's relationship with his assistant Foma, as with that of the Holy Fool, we see the breadth of the painter's nature. Foma, like the Holy Fool, is simple, common, and coarse and this agitates the spiritual, intellectual Rublev. The test and proof of his empathy is in his tolerance and ability to love humanity as a whole, a challenge peculiarly Russian as Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky both struggled with this throughout their lives and in their literature. Rublev reveals a Christian willingness to understand human frailty, as we see in his lenience towards the slothful, lying Foma, and his compassion for the Holy Fool. From the start he shows himself as

sensitive and soft-spoken, with his head slightly tilted as figures in icon paintings often are, signifying humility.

Rublev, in a sense, becomes the conscience of his times, witnessing and trying to forge a solution to the rifts he sees. The conflict between the Grand Duke and his brother epitomizes the theme of Russian against Russian, brother against brother, that occurs throughout the film. We see it in the first episode with the jester who, for merely entertaining people, is beaten and taken away by four horsemen - an apocalyptic augury of the raids, famines and persecutions that follow. We see it in the character of the vindictive Kirill who reported the Jester to the horsemen and is seen persecuting the pagans. In 'The Last Judgement' and 'The Raid' it is even more pronounced. Scenes of torture, pillaging and destruction culminate in the sacking of the Vladimir Cathedral.

When Rublev, the passive observer, finally acts, it is to kill a Russian soldier who is about to rape the Holy Fool. Rublev's creed of beneficence has led him to murder and it is precisely this predicament of polarities touching - good and evil, kindness and killing, reality and dream - that Tarkovsky stresses in both his theme and aesthetic. When Rublev, disillusioned after the murder, gives up painting and vows silence, the ghost of Theophanes argues that "fighting evil means fighting humanity" and that to give up his art is to commit "a grave sin." What Andrei fails to realise is that what he cannot effect in life - i.e. love, unity - he can in art. In

Tarkovsky's view, the vision and ideal of the artist inevitably meets with failure in practical affairs, but this is precisely why the artist must translate his vision into art, where, as we see in the Bell episode, it triumphs.

Peals of Epiphany

The theme of bringing contraries into accord is developed and culminates in 'The Bell' episode, where monks, nobles and peasants are all united in the achievement of the bell. Rublev, who has been silent and inactive for fifteen years, comes to the epiphanic realization of his duty as an artist. The dream sequence with Rublev and Kirill under a tree in the rain harks us back to the first episode, where the three monks, Rublev, Kirill and Daniil are almost a Trinity in the religious sense, if it were not for their dissension of views. Kirill has qualities of the Old Testament Father with his wrath and retribution; Rublev of the Son, with his compassion; and Daniil the Holy Spirit, for his mildness and mediation. In the dream Daniil is represented by the raven Kirill holds in his hands. This vision of accord marks Rublev's regeneration and conception of The Old Testament Trinity that he has yet to paint. It is reinforced by a penitent Kirill, who, now free of envy, repeats Theophanes argument, telling Andrei, "It is a sin to deny the divine spark."

It is not until the overwhelmed Boriska sobs in the arms of Rublev while the new bell rings out for nobles, merchants, monks, and peasants alike, that he

comes to the full realization of his duty. A redemption through art is effected. Rublev breaks his long vow of silence, exclaiming, "What a feast day for the people! We'll go off together, you and me. You'll cast bells and I'll paint icons. That will give the people something to celebrate." We, with Rublev, catch something of the eternal significance of creation and the capacity of art to unite disparities. What Rublev learns, and what Tarkovsky insists upon is that the artist "...is always a servant.., perpetually trying to pay for the gift that has been given to him as if by miracle."¹⁴ The proof of this miracle is the Epilogue's display of Rublev's works.

Conclusion

Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublev*, though unwieldy at times, presents a fundamentally Christian view of the role of art and artist and is successfully expressive of religious epiphany. His aesthetics of time, iconic composition, and a fusing of naturalism and the numinous, work with his thematic vision to involve the audience in a cinema of total experience. In a word, we are transported. I remember watching the film in a theatre full of Russian-Canadians and various moviegoers, and recall the profound hush that lasted for quite a while after the film's final images. It was not disquiet or consternation, but rather like a spell that lasted where subject and object needed time to disassociate after a period of intense connection. In our consumer age of diversion and entertainment, where audiences

seek to dispose of time rather than gain experience, Tarkovsky restores the sacramental quality to art and revives our spiritual slumber.

¹ Tarkovsky, Andrei, *Sculpting in Time*. p34, Faber and Faber, London, 1989

² Schrader, Paul, *Transcendental Style in Film*. p3-6, Univ. of California 1972

³ Tarkovsky, Andrei, *Sculpting in Time*. p38, Faber and Faber, London, 1989

⁴ Schrader, Paul, *Transcendental Style in Film*.p10, Univ. of California 1972

⁵ Tarkovsky, Andrei, *Sculpting in Time*. p40, Faber and Faber, London, 1989

⁶ Tarkovsky, Andrei, *Sculpting in Time*. p108, Faber and Faber, London, 1989

⁷ Dalle Vache, Angela, *Cinema and Painting*. p138, Univ. of Texas Press, 1996

⁸ Tarkovsky, Andrei, *Sculpting in Time*. p63, Faber and Faber, London, 1989

⁹ Petrie, Graham, *The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky: A Visual Fugue*. p194

¹⁰ Tarkovsky, Andrei, *Sculpting in Time*. p58, Faber and Faber, London, 1989

¹¹ Dalle Vache, Angela, *Cinema and Painting*. p136, Univ. of Texas Press, 1996

¹² Kandinsky, Wassily, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. p28, Wittenborn, Schultz, Inc, New York, 1947

¹³ Petrie, Graham, *The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky: A Visual Fugue*. p59 Indiana Press, 1994.

¹⁴ Tarkovsky, Andrei, *Sculpting in Time*. p38, Faber and Faber, London, 1989